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SUBJECT: INDIA AND NEPAL TO TEST BORDER CONTROLS

1. (SBU) Summary: India and Nepal have agreed to a pilot program to check documents at only one border crossing as an experiment in increasing security along the 1,750 km open border. MEA officials downplayed the significance of the decision with us, pointing out that any substantial control over movement across the border would take years to effect. However, the open Nepal border is an increasing concern to security forces who worry that Indian and Nepal-based Maoists and naxalites have been assisting each other and that Pakistan-supported terrorists have been entering India through Nepal. Steps toward restricting movement would increase the GOI's sense of security regarding the Maoist insurgency next door, but the border is vast and softer than the US-Canada border. End Summary.

One Border Control Post for Now

2. (U) The "Indian Express" reported on July 26 that the MEA, Home Ministry, and Indian security forces had decided to open a pilot border control post on the main Lucknow-Kathmandu road at Rupaidiha in Uttar Pradesh state (corresponding to Nepalganj in Nepal) starting in November. Although the 1950 Indo-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship mandates unrestricted border crossing for Nepalese and Indian citizens, the governments have the right to inspect documents to verify that persons crossing the border are in fact of those nationalities. Citizens of both nations will be able to present a variety of national, state and local government-issued identity cards to verify nationality. At present, no border control posts exist, and persons of any nationality are able to cross without inspection.

3. (SBU) MEA Under Secretary (Nepal) Manu Mahawar told Poloff on July 26 that the decision to implement the pilot program had been in the works for "years," noting that this project is a joint effort with the Government of Nepal. He denied that concerns about Maoists had motivated the decision, but pointed out that the governments of India and Nepal always had the right to verify the nationality of travelers, and that this project would serve as a data-gathering exercise to study the feasibility of an extension to the whole border. In any case, he noted, imposing border controls along the entire 1,750 km long border would take years.

Comment: A Feel-good Measure Only

4. (SBU) Although this pilot program will not impact any person's ability to transit the long and open border, the GOI has been increasingly concerned about the products of Nepal's instability spilling over into bordering states, manifested both as Maoist linkages with Indian naxalites and as Nepalese refugees from the fighting. The suspicion that Pakistan-supported terrorists also use Nepal as a transit route to enter India also fuels GOI worries. The government has already announced plans to double the strength of the paramilitary force patrolling the border areas in an effort to interdict Maoist rebels, naxalites and terrorists, and this latest step, while small, adds to the trend of slowly transforming the long, open boundary into a bona fide international border.

BLAKE